Chomolungma, Sagarmatha, and Mount Everest:

The Politics of Naming and the Struggle for Nepali Identity

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Abstract

The world's highest peak, revered as Sagarmatha in Nepali, Chomolungma in Sherpa and Limbu traditions, and Mount Everest in English, is more than a geographical landmark—it is a contested site of history, power, and cultural identity (Said, 1978; Onta, 1996). This article investigates the origins and significance of these names, tracing them back through indigenous oral traditions, colonial impositions, and nationalist projects. Using historical texts, ethnographic studies, and postcolonial theory, it investigates how name reflects fights for cultural hegemony, linguistic nationalism, and indigenous rights (Subba, 2025). This study advocates for multinomial recognition, such as Chomolungma-Sagarmatha, as a pluralistic strategy to honouring Nepal's different identities while addressing imperial legacies.

Keywords: Mt. Everest, Sagarmatha, Chomolungma, cultural hegemony, linguistic nationalism, indigenous rights

1. Introduction

Standing at 8,848 meters, the world's highest peak is a symbol of human aspiration and natural grandeur. Its different names, including Chomolungma, Sagarmatha and Mount Everest, speak to a variety of cultural, political and historical stories (Subba, 2025). These names are more than just labels; they represent indigenous populations' voices, the goals of a new nation-state, and the lingering shadow of colonial power (Said, 1978). As a Nepali researcher, I approach this topic with a deep understanding for the mountain's cultural significance and a critical eye on the power dynamics at work in its name.

Giving a name is not merely an act of identification; it often gives power, covers up the past or affirms who people are (Onta, 1996). Because Nepal is home to over a hundred ethnic groups, deciding on a name for its highest mountain has been about supporting Nepali identity as well as dealing with the country's indigenous and colonial history (Shrestha, 2001). This essay examines how Chomolungma reflects indigenous devotion, Sagarmatha language nationalism, and Mount Everest imperial power. By placing these names in postcolonial and anthropological contexts, I seek to illuminate Nepal's heterogeneous identity struggle.

2. Methods

(i). Primary documents like the Nepal Gazette (1956), the records of the Royal Geographical Society (from 1865) and old texts like Yoginītantra have been analyzed to pin down traditional names like Chomolungma (Huber, 2001; Onta, 1996).

(ii). Linguistic Analysis: A study of the origins of the names Chomolungma (Tibetan/Sherpa/Limbu), Sagarmatha (Sanskrit/Nepali), and Mount Everest (English), using language resources like the Nepali Brihat Shabdakosh (2040 BS) and UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (n.d.) to understand their cultural importance and risk of disappearing (Subba, 2025).

(iii). This work involves studies of Sherpa and Limbu rites (the offering of lamps to Chomolungma) and questionnaires with elders from those communities (Bishop, 1990; Huber, 2001).

(iv). Postcolonial Critique: According to the theories of Onta (1996) and Said's Orientalism (1978), a postcolonial critique would paint names as discourses of power by focusing on linguistic nationalism vis-à-vis colonial hegemonies.

(v) Data gathering consists of collecting data from prior research, folklore, traditional customs and social and policy documentation among the Sherpa and Limbu communities.

(vi). The Comparative analysis of indigenous and national identity.

3. Chomolungma: Original Name and Cultural Meaning

Sherpa, Limbu, and Tibetans call the peak Chomolungma, a spiritual and cultural symbol. Chomo (goddess), lung (valley, cave, or rock), and ma (mother) in Tibetan mean "Mother Goddess of the World" (Bishop, 1990; Huber, 2001). This name reflects these societies' animistic and Buddhist cosmologies, which revere the mountain as a guardian and life source.

To the Sherpas Chomolungma is represented as a resident deity high in the glaciers, valleys and peaks of the Himalayas (Huber, 2001). Likewise, Limbu mundhum (oral scriptures) consider the mountain to be a divine mother known for her power and fertility (Subba, 2023). The stories explain how mountains play a central role in holding communities together and reinforcing their culture and beliefs. For example, Sherpa folk customs which include honoring Chomolungma before a climb, have attracted notice (Bishop, 1990).

The Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (n.d.) by UNESCO notes that the predominance of global languages like English and national languages like Nepali compromises the linguistic legacy of Chomolungma. Along with the name such changes lose the cultural knowledge that was originally there. Chomolungma's marginalising in favour of Mount Everest or Sagarmatha mirrors larger trends of cultural displacement experienced by indigenous people in Nepal (Shrestha, 2001).

4. Sagarmatha: A Nation-Building Project

As stated in the Nepal Gazette (1956), the government of Nepal officially named the mountain Sagarmatha in 1956. A poetic metaphor for Nepal's Himalayan identity, Sagarmatha is derived from the Sanskrit words sagar (sky) and matha (peak), conjuring the image of a mountain touching the sky (Subba, 2025). During Nepal's transition to a modern state after the Rana era, this name was part of a larger endeavour to establish a united Nepali identity (Onta, 1996).

As a form of linguistic nationalism, the adoption of Sagarmatha sought to protect Nepal's Sanskrit-based history

against colonial influences (Nepal Gazette, 1956). The name is said to have been suggested by historian Baburam Acharya, who believed it stood for Nepal's culture and independence (Shrestha, 2001). The change also caused the Chomolungma, Limbu and Sherpa peoples—whose languages and identities were not related to Sanskrit—to be marginalised (Subba, 2025).

The reason Nepal chose Sagarmatha proves that the country's unity and range of ethnic groups are not compatible. Its emphasis on national honor helped to spread a belief that the Khas-Arya culture was superior to the indigenous groups (Shrestha, 2001). In the past, when certain national groupings were attempting to establish a feeling of national identity, their rulers would purposefully ignore the less fortunate members of society (Said, 1978).

5. Mount Everest: Naming the Imperial Approach

Sir George Everest, Surveyor General of India, was rewarded when the British Royal Geographical Society named Mount Everest in 1865. This decision's lack of community input typified colonial mapping traditions of giving non-European landscapes Western names (Said, 1978). Ironically, the British officials ignored Sir George Everest's wishes for a native name for the peak and proceeded to name it after himself (Onta, 1996).

The term Mount Everest spread all over the world in science, on maps and in everyday speech, making it the official choice. In his view (Said, 1978), renaming the world helped to show Europe's power and superiority. It erased indigenous peoples' identities and solidified Britain's control over the Himalayan region. The Western predisposition to classify and manage

the "Other" is reflected in such naming practices, as pointed out by Edward Said in Orientalism (Said, 1978).

When Mount Everest became famous, Chomolungma and Sagarmatha were ignored and became less known. Mount Everest's prominence in stories about climbing, tourism and media comes from its strong presence in our language (Shrestha, 2001). The meaning of the word underlines that colonisation has shaped how the world feels about the Himalayas.

6. Critique: Identity vs. Hegemony

6.1 Imbalance of Naming

The naming of the peak reveals a power imbalance, as summarized below:

Name	Linguistic Origin	Accrediting Body	Power Relations
Chomolungma	Tibetan/ Sherpa/ Limbu	Indigenous traditions	Cultural rights (Bishop, 1990)
Sagarmatha	Sanskrit/ Nepali	Nepali state	Linguistic nationalism (Nepal Gazette, 1956)
Mount Everest	English	British Royal Geographical Society	Imperialism (Onta, 1996; Said, 1978)

Chomolungma embodies the spiritual and cultural heritage of indigenous communities, rooted in centuries-old oral traditions (Huber, 2001). Sagarmatha reflects Nepal's

postcolonial assertion of sovereignty but marginalizes non-Sanskrit-speaking groups (Shrestha, 2001). Mount Everest, imposed by colonial powers, prioritizes Western cartographic authority over local knowledge (Said, 1978).

6.2 Current Impact

The dominance of Mount Everest has profound implications:

The use of Mount Everest by international media and tourism companies largely spreads colonial-style views (Shrestha, 2001). Most times, climbing expeditions or documentaries do not refer to Chomolungma or Sagarmatha.

Indigenous names are being ignored which affects the diversity of languages and cultural heritage, according to UNESCO (n.d.). More and more young people from Sherpa and Limbu communities now use the name Mount Everest daily, moving them away from using their traditional languages (Subba, 2023).

Everest still being the main name for the mountain shows how Western naming practices are given preference over those from the region (Said, 1978).

Such impacts prompt us to think about changing naming systems to respect Nepal's diversity..

7. Alternative Approach: Multinomial Recognition

Changing old names to original ones is becoming popular worldwide such as in the United States where Mt. McKinley was renamed Denali and in Australia with Ayers Rock being renamed Uluru (Bishop, 1990; UNESCO, n.d.). They show that using aboriginal names is a way to correct mistakes of the past and support cultural diversity. A similar name change in

Nepal—like Chomolungma-Sagarmatha—could build a connection between indigenous and national heritage (Subba, 2025).

A multinomial approach would involve:

Including Chomolungma and Sagarmatha alongside Mount Everest in school textbooks will help pupils learn about Nepal's varied legacy.

In promotional materials, people talk about Chomolungma-Sagarmatha to highlight the culture and pride of the country which attracts people who appreciate that.

In some nations, like New Zealand, maps now include both Māori and English language names (Subba, 2025).

Such actions would not destroy Mount Everest but rather place it as a colonial relic therefore enabling Chomolungma and Sagarmatha to occupy their proper place. This strategy fits Nepal's constitutional dedication to pluralism and could motivate like initiatives for other historically important places (Constitution of Nepal, 2015)..

8. Conclusion

The merging of local culture, nationalism, and post-colonial identity in Nepal can be best exemplified by the naming of the tallest mountain in the world. Sagarmatha stands as a symbol of Nepal's aspiration for unity, whereas Chomolungma epitomizes the religious habits of the Sherpa, Limbu, and Tibetan peoples (Huber 2001; Nepal Gazette 1956). According to Said (1978) and Onta (1996), the name was given by colonial authorities who wanted to erase traditional local names.

Choosing a new name relates to language, but it also supports healing for those hurt, cultural updates and correction of unequal power (Subba). 2025). A sense of national pride and the preservation of indigenous cultures can be achieved by Nepal through the promotion of multinomial policies, Chomolungma-Sagarmatha. I feel this process can help other postcolonial countries in comparable situations. The journey to a changing Nepali identity starts by seeing the mountain as a symbol of toughness, diversity and hope rather than just a mountain itself.

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